

Traffic Safety News and Facts for Employers April 2003

Runge Plans to Rewrite Fuel Economy Standards to Reverse Harm

Dr. Jeffrey Runge, Administrator of NHTSA, plans to rewrite fuel economy standards and reverse the harm the rules have done to car and truck safety over the past quarter century. According to Runge, planned changes to the corporate average fuel economy program likely will include a redefinition of what a truck is and could make vehicle weight classes more important than the distinction between cars and trucks. But for the first time last week, during testimony at a Senate hearing on truck safety, he said CAFE actually could be used as a tool to improve safety. The program long has been blamed for making vehicles more dangerous. That's because cars, which meet tougher standards, have been made smaller, and motorists seeking larger vehicles have switched in increasing numbers to trucks, which meet a looser standard. The consequence: Lighter cars and more trucks share the roads, which increases the risk to car occupants and has a negative overall impact on fuel economy. The notion that CAFE could be used to reverse the trend has surfaced in the midst of an uproar over light-truck safety. The top issues are truck rollovers and the mismatch between cars and trucks in collisions. **For the NHTSA press release, visit <http://www.nhtsa.dot.gov/hot/FinalSUVStatement.html>.**

Rubbernecking, Driver Fatigue and Scenery are Some of the Leading Causes of Distraction-Related Traffic Crashes

Rubbernecking, driver fatigue and looking at scenery are some of the leading causes of distraction-related traffic crashes, according to a study conducted by Virginia Commonwealth University. The study, conducted for the Virginia Department of Motor Vehicles, may be one of the most comprehensive of its kind in the nation. More than 2,700 crash scenes involving distracted drivers and nearly 4,500 drivers were studied. While cell phones have been widely criticized as the cause of distracted driving, they ranked sixth in the study's list of distracted driving behaviors. Looking at surrounding traffic, roadside crashes and other incidents was the primary distraction in 16 percent of the crashes studied, followed by driver fatigue, 12 percent; looking at scenery, 10 percent;

passenger and child distractions, nine percent; and adjusting the radio, CD or tape player, seven percent. Cell phones were cited as the primary distraction in slightly more than five percent of the crashes studied. **For more information visit the VCU website at**
<http://www.vcu.edu/uns/Releases/2003/march/030703b.html>.

Department of Transportation's Challenges for 2003 Involve Highway Safety, Security, or Infrastructure

Five of the Department of Transportation's challenges for 2003 involve highway safety, security, or infrastructure, according to a new report by DOT Office of Inspector General.

The 5 challenges are:

- reducing fatalities and injuries on U.S. highways and emphasizing safety belt law enforcement
- clamping down on fraud, obtaining better value in highway and bridge investments, and reauthorizing the Transportation Equity Act of the 21st Century (TEA-21)
- ensuring highway safety as the Southern border is opened to Mexican carriers under the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA)
- strengthening computer security and investment controls for DOT's multibillion-dollar information technology investment
- continuing to improve transportation security

To reduce traffic fatalities, DOT must:

- increase safety belt use
- improve the credibility and integrity of the commercial driver's license (CDL) program
- continue implementation of the Transportation Recall Enhancement, Accountability, and Documentation (TREAD) Act

For more information on *Top Management Challenges, Department of Transportation*, report number PT-2003-012, visit
www.oig.dot.gov/challenges.

Local Officials for Transportation Urges Congress to Follow Key Recommendations When it Reauthorizes TEA-21

Local Officials for Transportation, a coalition of national associations representing elected and appointed officials, is urging Congress to follow key recommendations when it reauthorizes the Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century (TES-21). Building on the foundation of TES-21, the coalition's goals include:

- increasing funding for federal highway and transit programs
- increasing the role of local officials in planning transportation projects and funding decisions by allocating resources to the regional level
- creating new approaches to combating congestion in metropolitan areas
- increasing safety on rural roads

The coalition supports reforms that would allow local officials to make decisions on how federal funds are spent and to promote a better project delivery system that gets highway and transit projects approved and built more quickly. **For more information, visit**

http://www.pti.org/research.asp?pref=http://pti.nw.dc.us/elib/publish/transport_conference.asp.

Researchers at Johns Hopkins University and at IIHS Suggest Measures to Improve the Protection of Older Vehicle Occupants Should Be Pursued

Lowering traffic speeds and improving safety belt use rates are already known to be effective in reducing crash forces acting on vehicle occupants of any age. Measures to improve the protection of older vehicle occupants in crashes should be pursued, according to research performed by Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine and Insurance Institute for Highway Safety. Future developments in vehicle design may improve the protection of older vehicle occupants, but are not yet ready for use, according to the researchers. Possible improvements include modifications to safety belts to distribute the restraining force better or having four points of attachment to the vehicle instead of the current three points. Also, crash force could be reduced if crush zones were enlarged in conjunction with reducing the stiffness of vehicle front ends. Much research has been directed toward screening older drivers; however, older persons continue to be at increased risk of injury when traveling as a passenger.

The study was published in the March edition of Accident Analysis & Prevention. **For more information, call 1-888-437-4636.**

Gas Prices Last Month Climbed Higher and Faster than Oil Analysts Predicted

Gas prices climbed sharply last month, higher and faster than oil analysts predicted. Fleet managers are becoming concerned about their inability to forecast short and longer-term fuel prices, and fleet budgets are being severely impacted by the weight of higher operating costs.

Side Windows that Remain Intact may Become Standard Equipment on New Vehicles

Side windows that remain intact, even when struck with a crowbar, may become standard equipment on all new vehicles. The glass is now an option on some luxury cars, but the windows may be mandated as part of new rollover safety regulations being developed by NHTSA. Currently, side and rear windows are made of tempered glass that shatters into tiny pieces when struck. The pieces are not jagged, which reduces the risk of lacerations. Windshields, on the other hand, are made from two layers of glass surrounding a thin layer of clear plastic. Because of the plastic, windshields don't shatter when struck. NHTSA is considering a regulation that would require all automobile glass to be made like windshields.

NHTSA Stopped Rulemaking Requiring Automakers to Make Seat Belts that Accommodate Larger-Than-Average Occupants

NHTSA has stopped rulemaking efforts to revise standards that would have required carmakers to make seat belts that accommodate larger-than-average occupants. NHTSA said it stopped its rulemaking process because it does not believe additional regulations are needed. The agency also said it had concerns about the use of "extenders" which would be required to comply with any new regulations designed to accommodate larger-than-average persons.

General Motors Says Government Crash Tests Have Forced Automakers to Make SUVs Stiffer and More Deadly in Crashes in Order to Get High Safety Ratings

General Motors said recently that government crash tests have forced

automakers to make sport utility vehicles stiffer and more deadly in crashes with cars in order to get high safety ratings that consumers can use when buying a vehicle. Although the stiffer front ends of SUVs and other light trucks protect their occupants better, they push deeper into other vehicles in collisions, GM said in a study presented at the 2003 Society of Automotive Engineers World Congress. A stiffer structure will crumple less and do a poorer job of dispersing the energy delivered during a crash. This means that SUVs often do more damage to smaller vehicles in a collision. The report comes at a crucial time for the industry, as automakers face increasing pressure to make SUVs and other light trucks safer. The industry is researching technologies that help drivers avoid rollover crashes and reduce the risk to cars from being struck by heavier, higher-riding SUVs. NHTSA is expected to release recommendations on the compatibility issue between SUVs and cars this spring. NHTSA Administrator Runge has made the issue one of his top priorities. **For more information on crash test rating, visit <http://www-nrd.nhtsa.dot.gov> or <http://www.ncac.gwu.edu>.**

Instructions for Installing Child Safety Seats are Written in Language too Difficult for Many Adults to Understand

Instructions for installing child safety seats in cars are written in language too difficult for many adults to understand, researchers say. Such manuals are written at a tenth-grade reading level on average, according to a new study, while data suggest that nearly a quarter of U.S. adults read at or below a fifth-grade level, and at least 25 percent read at about an eighth-grade level. The findings are cause for concern because motor vehicle collisions are a leading cause of death and injury for infants and children. About 80 percent of car safety seats are improperly installed or misused, the study said, citing previous research. The study, in the March issue of Pediatrics, was conducted by Dr. Mark Wegner and Deborah Girasek at the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences in Bethesda, Md. The Juvenile Products Manufacturers Association, which represents car-seat makers, disputed the findings. **For more information on child safety seats, visit <http://www.jpma.org>.**

A UK employer Was Fined After an Off-Duty Company Driver Was Killed in a Crash

The owner of a delivery company in the UK has been fined for breaching health and safety regulations after a driver suffering from exhaustion was killed in a crash - even though he was not working at the time of the incident. Industry experts warn the ground-breaking case sets a dangerous precedent for companies, which could find themselves facing a string of fines following the case. The driver died instantly in the crash when his car left the road after hitting a pile of stones. On the day of the incident he had finished working on a series of shifts that had lasted more than 16 hours. The director of the employee's company, which was not named, was prosecuted after admitting failure to ensure the health and safety of employees by letting him drive excessive hours without appropriate rest breaks. Insurance company Zurich highlighted the case to warn fleets to be aware of their health and safety responsibilities. A Zurich survey has revealed that 30% of serious motor vehicle claims it has received in the past five years were caused by driver fatigue.

A New Device Monitors Tire Pressure and Keeps Tires Properly Inflated

The massive recall of Firestone tires three years ago led to increased awareness among consumers and lawmakers about the need to monitor tire pressure and spurred the development of tire pressure warning systems. A Pittsburgh company came up with a device, due on the market in the next 18 months, that not only monitors tire pressure, but also keeps tires properly inflated at all times -- even when there is a leak and notifies drivers when it's time to replace or repair their tires. Cycloid Co.'s AutoPump was on display at the 2003 Society of Automotive Engineers World Congress at Cobo Center recently. DaimlerChrysler AG's Chrysler Group is showing a Jeep Grand Cherokee concept called the Concierge that features the technology. **For more information on Cycloid Co. or the product, visit <http://www.cycloid.com/news.htm>.**

UK Industry Experts Advocate Ban on the Use of All Private Cars for Business Purposes

Leading UK industry experts warn that employers should introduce a ban on the use of all private cars for business purposes in a bid to take control of staff

health and safety on the road. Nigel Underdown, head of customer relations at Bank of Scotland Vehicle Management, claims the trend of giving employees responsibility for their own cars, including maintenance and insurance, is dangerous when they will be driving on company business. Employers are under immense pressure to prove they are meeting their duty of care to drivers on business. Areas of responsibility include ensuring employees are insured to drive a car on company business, that it is 'fit for purpose' and that the employee is skilled enough to drive the business mileage being required. Underdown added: 'Very few employers bother to inspect owner-drivers' insurance policies, which should be carried out on an annual basis along with driving license checks. Even a clerk making a daily trip to the post office is considered to be driving on business, but few employers acknowledge this. To remove the risk of prosecution to both employer and employee, I suggest that it is in companies' best interests to completely ban the use of private cars for business use. This may seem a draconian reaction but employers have to consider the risk, especially when there is a range of safer options available.

Crash-Prone New York Taxi Cabs Could Soon Have "Black Boxes"

Crash-prone New York taxi cabs could soon have "black boxes" that give insurers more information on the circumstances surrounding accidents, the Wall Street Journal reported last week. American Transit Insurance Co., an insurer of 80 percent of New York City's taxis and limousines, has tapped IBM to get the project off the ground. IBM, which is developing what it expects will be a large business in telematics for monitoring and communicating with automobiles, is helping design the system and will run it. The black boxes -- which will be installed late this summer -- will be custom-designed, but are projected to cost a few hundred dollars a car. The taxi program is not expected to raise invasion-of-privacy issues, because data would be sent to computer systems only after a crash has occurred.